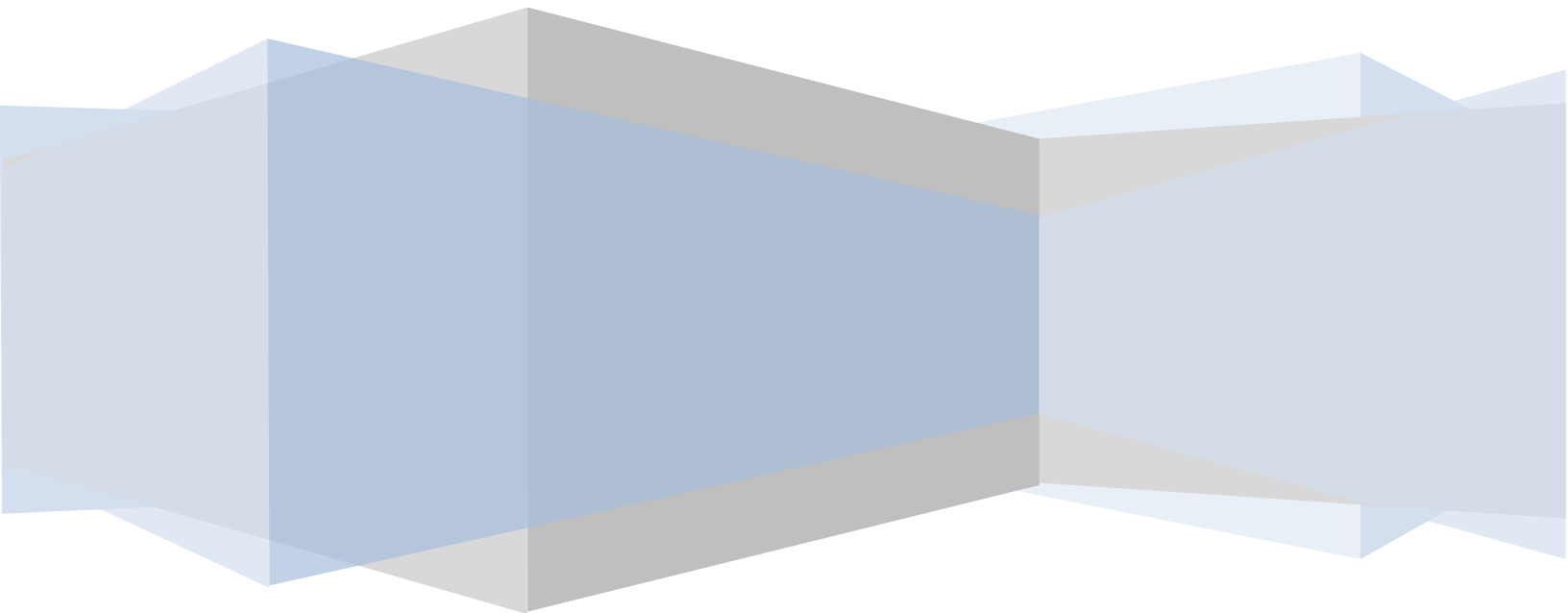


# Colchester Senior Center Study Group

Report to the Board of Selectmen



# *Colchester Senior Center Study Committee Report*

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April 1, 2011

The Honorable Gregg Schuster, First Selectman  
Town of Colchester  
127 Norwich Avenue  
Colchester, CT 06415

Dear First Selectman Schuster,

It has been my honor to serve as the Senior Center Study Committee Chair alongside nine other dedicated appointees. The members of the study committee gave willingly of their time and talents, extending their participation beyond their initial commitment to ensure that we reviewed all available options with the same vigor. I am pleased to inform you that we met our charge on behalf of the residents of Colchester.

On behalf of the Senior Center Study Committee, I ask that you accept this report as a summary of our work and thoughtfully consider the recommendations it contains for the new facility and enhanced services. Assuming that we can adequately address parking and traffic safety issues and guarantee a separate, dedicated space, the committee supports the use of the William J. Johnston Middle School for the new senior center.

This decision is consistent with the preference expressed by Colchester residents through a community survey conducted in November. In an additional recommendation, the study group would ask that I (or my designee) serve on any related planning and development activities as this important work moves forward.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to serve on the Senior Center Study Committee. I look forward to your feedback and would be happy to respond to any questions you may have. Please feel free to contact me should you need any additional information to fully consider our recommendations.

Best Regards,

Theresa Hendricksen

Theresa Hendricksen, Chair  
Colchester Senior Center Study Committee

***Colchester Senior Center Study Group Membership***

Theresa Hendricksen, Chair

Norm Dupuis, Vice Chair

Jody Barr

Jack Faski

Goldie Liverant

Michelle Kormoroski

Pat Nardella

Pam Scheibelein

Winnie Standish

Selectwoman Rosemary Coyle, BOS Liaison

Donna Skawinski, Alternate

Study Group support provided by:

Patti White, Senior Center Director

### **Executive Summary**

The Town of Colchester, like many towns across Connecticut, is struggling with ways to best address the needs of its senior citizens. This has become a more daunting task in recent times in light of competing demands within the context of reduced revenues and tightening budgets due to the economic recession.

A small, passionate group of residents were asked to come together and form the Senior Center Study Group. The group began meeting in late 2009 to examine which of the following three options - a new stand alone center, a joint/multi-purpose center and/or housing the senior center in existing facilities - would be the best way to proceed. They were also asked to identify a set of core services that should be offered to seniors and to recommend what populations should be served by the senior center. After months of vigorous discussion and extensive information gathering, the Senior Center Study Committee has come to a thoughtful and responsive decision.

With regard to the core senior services, the study group is recommending that a variety of programs, activities and services should be available. The results of a community survey showed that residents as a whole support an array of services including health and nutrition, recreation and leisure, as well as educational and social services. With regard to the population(s) to be served the group focused exclusively on meeting the needs of seniors in the community, with the majority of survey respondents indicating that services should be provided to those 55 and older.

With regard to the facility and its location, several options were considered. The Town Planner generated a list of vacant parcels and discussions were held with the Bacon Academy Board of Trustees on options for renovating or purchasing the building that currently houses the senior center. The study group visited several senior centers in the region as well as the William J. Johnston Middle School.

After sixteen months of deliberations, the study group is recommending that a separate dedicated space for the new senior center be included in the plans to renovate the William J. Johnston Middle School, provided that parking and traffic safety concerns are a priority in the planning process, and adequately addressed in the final design.

Further, the study group recommends that the chair (or her designee) be appointed to serve on any subsequent committees that are charged with planning or implementing this recommendation.

## **Background and Introduction**

Colchester, like many communities across Connecticut, is struggling to balance meeting the needs of seniors with other special populations during difficult fiscal times. Demographic trends suggest that Colchester's senior population, like most of Connecticut, will continue to grow as more residents join the 55 and older age cohort, reduce their involvement in the workforce, prepare for retirement and have more opportunity for leisure activities.

While an array of discussions and recommendations for the senior center had been evolving over the last decade, the Colchester Senior Center Study Group was established last year to assess how the town could best prepare to meet the changing needs of its growing senior population.

Motivated by a combination of factors, including the deteriorating condition of the existing senior center building and changes in senior center staffing and local leadership, the study group was formed in December, 2009.

Selectman Gregg Schuster met with the appointees to discuss the study committee charge and members were instructed to "think outside the box" when exploring options and were cautioned that funding should be an essential factor in their deliberations.

Theresa Hendricksen was elected the Chair and Norm Dupuis was elected Vice Chair. The study group agreed to move forward and gather information on Colchester's senior population and their needs. In meeting their charge, the members explored what other towns had done to address similar needs, examined the advantages and disadvantages of each senior center option, and analyzed funding considerations for each of those options.

Meeting almost monthly, the study group reviewed all relevant materials provided by the Board of Selectman, was briefed on previous discussions about the senior center, reviewed town-owned land parcels, explored a variety of funding mechanisms, made several site visits to regional senior centers, met with a range of content experts, toured the William J. Johnston School and analyzed various space needs assessments previously commissioned by the town.

***The Board of Selectman charged the Senior Center Study Group with the following objectives:***

- 1) Developing a recommendation on whether a new Senior Center should be a new stand alone center, a joint/multi-purpose center, and/or housed in existing facilities;***
- 2) Developing a recommendation on what populations the Senior Center should and/or could serve for all options; and***
- 3) Developing a recommendation on what services should and/or could be provided at the Senior Center for all options.***

### **Summary of Information Gathering**

The study committee approached its charge in a thoughtful manner, choosing to gather the information they needed in a variety of ways and from several sources over the sixteen months that they met. The three primary methods of information gathering used by the study group included site visits, a written survey of community members, and presentations by content experts. The information itself was challenged, discussed, debated and synthesized by members at their regular meetings.

#### ***Site Visit Key Findings***

Six site visits to area senior centers were scheduled between February and April, 2010 so that group members could see and experience services and facilities serving seniors in communities similar to Colchester. The members had an opportunity to visit three (3) stand alone senior centers, two (2) community centers that included separate dedicated space for seniors, and one (1) community center model with senior activities interwoven throughout the building. Seven members of the Senior Center Study Committee participated in the site visits that were conducted in Coventry, East Lyme, Glastonbury, Groton, Lebanon and Tolland.

Staff at each of the senior centers that were visited confirmed that the planning process for renovating or building a new facility took several years and that funding sources varied for the construction or renovation of the six centers visited. However, it should be noted that all centers receive town operating funds.

Some important facility requirements were identified during the site visits and were discussed by the study group for applicability in Colchester. These considerations included, but were not limited to:

- ensuring adequate storage and parking space;
- making the building accessible through automatic door openers with a design that does not increase a draft in the entryway or building;
- having a large open room for exercising and dance programs, making the space more versatile through installation of room dividers;
- maintaining private space for medical and counseling services; and
- ensuring an adequate kitchen size and design to meet the needs of the population and the scheduled activities.

In most of the centers visited, outdoor space is not widely used by seniors, and high ceilings presented both heating and cooling challenges as well as acoustical and budgetary issues. It was also noted that most centers have a computer lab on site. In East Lyme, for example, the senior center and the library are in the same building and share a variety of resources, including the computer lab. Counts of participant and program usage varied by town as do age, residency requirements, funding and policies for shared space.

These site visits left the study group members with the sense that Colchester's seniors were not receiving comparable services in comparable facilities to seniors living in similar communities. Yet, they served as a reminder of the many creative and flexible options to be considered in determining recommendations to best meet the needs of Colchester's seniors in the current fiscal climate.

The study group held one of its fall meetings at the William J. Johnston School. The agenda included a presentation by the Superintendent and a tour of the facility to review the planned renovation. The members discussed the benefits and challenges of recommending the inclusion of a new, dedicated space for seniors as a component within the re-design and renovation of the WJJ school building.

### ***Community Survey Results***

The study group developed and conducted a community survey to gather additional information, help them make the best recommendations possible and to test whether their thinking was consistent with the general public. The survey questions focused on the following key concepts:

- Does the community agree that the current center no longer meets the need of Colchester's seniors?
- Does a separate senior center, a community center model or a joint/multi-purpose model best meet Colchester's needs?
- Does the community have a preference for renovating/utilizing the current center site?
- Has the study group identified the right mix of "core" services?

The survey was open to all adults in the community with its release in November, 2010. Attention was given to creating a broad appeal with several options for participation to assure a credible survey return rate. As such, the survey was available electronically via Survey Monkey on the town website, handed out by volunteers at polling places, distributed through the public schools, and was available in hard copy for pick-up and drop-off at the library, town offices, and the senior center. The survey was also publicized in the local media to improve public awareness. A copy of the written survey appears in Appendix 2.

#### ***Highlights of the Survey Results:***

- ***86% agree that the current Senior Center is inadequate.***
- ***68% think moving the Senior Center to a new location is the best option.***
- ***89% agree that core Senior Center services should include health and nutrition, recreation and leisure, education programs and social services.***
- ***A majority of respondents prefer a separate, dedicated space within a multi-purpose community center.***
- ***A majority of the respondents feel that Senior Center services should be available for residents 55 and older.***



The survey contained a brief introduction on the Senior Center Study Group and included the committee charge. Ten key questions were offered for reflection by the public, followed by a few simple demographic questions. The survey was designed to be anonymous unless respondents chose to self-identify. Residents with questions on the study committee or the survey were directed to the Senior Center Director.

The survey response rate exceeded expectations with 411 residents participating – 123 through Survey Monkey and 288 in the paper format. Of the nearly 400 responses analyzed, 79% were familiar or somewhat familiar with the services available through the senior center and more than a quarter (27%) reported having family members who used the center weekly in the last six months. Sixty-five per cent (65%) of the respondents were female with a significant majority (90%) age 40 or older. Over half of the respondents (52%) reported living in Colchester for more than 20 years.

### ***Perspectives from Content Experts***

As the need arose, content experts from the state and local level were called upon to provide their perspectives, data, information and additional resources to the study committee. Those who made presentations at study group meetings included Bruce Sheridan, from the Department of Economic Development who provided an overview of potential funding options available through the Small Cities Block Grant and STEAP (Small Town Economic Assistance Program); Maggie Cosgrove, Town CFO who educated the group on the town bonding process and relevant financial considerations, Adam Turner, Town Planner, who provided an overview of potential locations for a new senior center and members of the Bacon Academy Board of Trustees, who provided an overview of the current lease and further considerations for renovation or purchase of the existing senior center facility. The group also met with Ron Goldstein, BOE Chairman, Karen Loiselle, Superintendent of Schools and other officials from the Board of Education to learn more about the William J. Johnston project.

## **Recommendations and Considerations**

### ***Core Senior Center Services***

Based on the results of the community survey and anecdotal observations, the group concluded that overall, the seniors who frequent the current senior center are pleased with the services they receive. Recognizing this, the following considerations should be met in any future senior center facility:

#### **Special Considerations:**

- The environment must be safe, welcoming and comfortable.
- The facility must provide both formal and informal opportunities for socialization.
- On-site programs should be supplemented with off-site and outdoor activities.
- Services should be expanded to help seniors access town, state and federal programs.

- Transportation services and adequate parking must be available.
- More specialized programming should be available for senior men and for senior couples.
- Space must adequately address service needs.

The list of core services generated by the study committee is aligned with their consensus decision to provide a range of education, leisure, health and nutrition services along with special events and support services. These programs and services are comparable to the range identified during senior center site visits in other communities and are consistent with the public sentiment expressed in the community survey. General considerations and examples follow.

*Education Services:*

- Provide a range of classes to promote life-long learning
- Offer technology classes

*Leisure Services:*

- Music
- Crafts
- Exercise Classes
- Cards and Games
- Day Trips

*Health Services:*

- Space to confidentially discuss individual medical concerns
- Specialized Health Clinics
- On-site medical services (i.e. blood pressure)

*Nutrition Services:*

- Meals (lunch)
- “Shared Bounty” Program

*Support Services:*

- Transportation
- Help with finding and applying for services

*Special Events:*

- “Volunteer Luncheon”
- Meeting Space
- Information Sessions

## **Senior Center Services**

*Offer enhanced programming in the following core service areas:*

- **Education**
- **Leisure**
- **Health**
- **Nutrition**
- **Support Services**
- **Special Events**

### ***Senior Center Recommendations***

The November 2010 study group meeting was dedicated to an intentional analysis of the three options identified in the charge. Group members were assigned to one of the three small groups and then asked to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and tensions of each option. The critical issues identified by the study group members during the SWOT analysis included the current economic situation created by the recession, the desire to maximize funding opportunities to offset costs to Colchester residents, the viability of a potential referendum vote and concerns about the timeframes and locations for building a new senior center facility. A more detailed summary of the SWOT Analysis appears in Appendix 1.

#### ***Special Considerations for the New Senior Center***

- *Creating a safe, welcoming facility with services deserving of Colchester's Seniors*
- *Maximizing funding opportunities through grants, bonding and cost-sharing*
- *Concern regarding new construction vs. renovation timeframes*
- *The current fiscal climate, public support and future affordability*
- *Utilize the WJJ School Renovation project to create a dedicated space for the new senior center*

Given these key considerations, the study group voted at its March 2011 meeting to recommend the William J. Johnston Middle School as the best option available for a new senior center, providing the renovation plans address concerns about parking and traffic safety and the need for a dedicated space with a separate entrance.

Further, the study group recommends that the chair (or her designee) be appointed to serve on any subsequent committees that are charged with planning or implementing this recommendation.

## **Supporting Materials and Attachments**

### **Appendix 1 - SWOT Analysis Summary**

	<b>Joint/Multi Purpose Option</b>	<b>Stand Alone Option</b>	<b>Existing Facility Option</b>
<b>Strengths</b> – What are the advantages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serves more of the population</li> <li>• Keeps services together</li> <li>• Can share gym, etc.</li> <li>• Already have a building (WJJS)</li> <li>• Integrates seniors with others in the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unique for seniors only</li> <li>• Dedicated resource</li> <li>• Perceived “value” of seniors in the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less construction needed so may generate more public support</li> <li>• Time element – already available to satisfy pressing needs</li> <li>• Larger facility than current space</li> </ul>
<b>Weaknesses</b> – What are the disadvantages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Least support from seniors who already use the current center</li> <li>• Sharing facilities and time slots (competition)</li> <li>• Parking lot congestions w/ busses/kids/teens</li> <li>• Who would have primary/priority use of the facility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Cost – no shared resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present center limited by physical structure, ownership &amp; condition</li> <li>• Work with restrictions – may be another facility not in the town center</li> <li>• Lack of public support</li> <li>• A suitable existing facility might not be available</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b> - What opportunities exist?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared maintenance</li> <li>• Possible grant \$\$\$ available</li> <li>• Good bond rating in Colchester</li> <li>• Can take advantage of existing WJJS building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aging population</li> <li>• Grants</li> <li>• Public support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing facility could be modified to house a new senior center @ reduced cost vs. new construction (WJJS)</li> <li>• Take advantage of federal and state funding/grant</li> </ul>
<b>Tensions</b> – What are the political & financial tensions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affordability</li> <li>• Defeated by referendum</li> <li>• Economic situation</li> <li>• Town may not understand needs of 1 group (seniors) compared to youth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic downturn</li> <li>• Amount of time to build a stand alone</li> <li>• Priority list relating to budget</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New construction could get better funding</li> <li>• Lack of public support</li> <li>• For WJJS, failure of BoE to get funding and public support</li> <li>• No existing facility available to meet the present needs of seniors</li> <li>• Questionable status of federal and state</li> </ul>

			funding/grant
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## **Appendix 2**

### **Community Input Survey**

The Board of Selectman appointed several town residents to serve on the Colchester Senior Center Study Group last December. The Study Group has been charged with:

- 1) Developing a recommendation on whether a new Senior Center should be a new stand alone center, a joint/multi- purpose center, and/or housed in existing facilities;
- 2) Developing a recommendation on what populations the Senior Center should and/or could serve for all options; and
- 3) Developing a recommendation on what services should and/or could be provided at the Senior Center for all options.

The Study Group has been meeting regularly to explore programming, service and facility options that best meet the needs of our senior citizens. The Study Group is currently seeking input from town residents through this survey and invites you to respond to the following questions.

Please circle the response that best represents your viewpoint:

**1. How familiar are you with the services available through the Senior Center?**

Not Familiar

Somewhat Familiar

Familiar

**2. How often have you or a family member used the Senior Center or its services in the past six months?**

Never

Weekly

Monthly

Please rate the following options being considered by the Study Group:

**3. A new Senior Center is needed because the current facility is inadequate to meet the demand for services.**

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

**4. Renovating a facility for a new Senior Center is the best option for Colchester.**

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

**5. Moving the Senior Center to a new location is the best option for Colchester.**

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

**6. The Senior Center should provide a variety of:**

**Health & nutrition services**

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

**Recreational & leisure activities**

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

**Educational programs**

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

**Social services**

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Somewhat Disagree

Disagree

Please circle your preference among the choices given.

**7. Services at the Senior Center should be available for residents:**

**50 and older**

**55 and older**

**60 and older**

**8. Which of the options below do you prefer for the new Senior Center?**

a) A separate, dedicated facility for the Senior Center

b) A separate, dedicated Senior Center within a multi-purpose community center

c) An integrated part of a multi-purpose community center

*Appendix 2: Colchester Senior Center Study Group Community Input Survey  
Continued*

Please tell us about little about yourself:

9. Gender:            Male                                  Female

10. Age:    18-25                  26-39                  40 – 54                          55- 69                  70 or older

11. How long have you lived in Colchester?  
     0-5 years                          6-10 years                          11-20 years                          more than 20 years

Additional comments:

Optional Information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you for your time.* Please mail or drop off your survey at the Senior Center (95 Norwich Ave.) or use any of the drop boxes at the Library or Town Hall. Your input is needed by Monday, November 15<sup>th</sup>.

For questions or more information on the Senior Center Study Group call the Senior Center at 860-537-3911 or visit the town website.